

## FEATURE

# Journeys to the West

By George Koo

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<http://www.atimes.com/article/how-the-west-was-learned/>

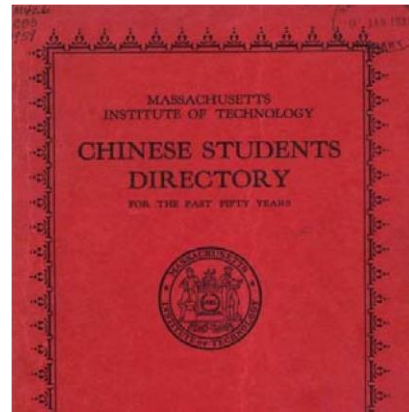
**A** new exhibition is celebrating the 140-year history of students from China that attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). “China Comes to Tech: 1877-1931” runs until November at the Maihaugen Gallery in the MIT Library on the Cambridge campus and contains a fascinating collection of personal stories.

Along with individual profiles, the exhibit also explains the circumstances and developments that led to the special relationship between China and MIT.

Eight of the first nine to enter MIT from China were members of the Chinese Education Mission (CEM), sent by the Qing government to receive an American college education. The CEM was the result of Yung Wing’s tireless efforts to convince the imperial court of the merits of exposing China’s youth to western education.

Yung, under the generous sponsorship of American missionaries, was the first Chinese to graduate from an American university – Yale, class of 1854. He recognized the value of a western education in helping China modernize and convinced the government to send young boys between the ages of 12 and 15 to live with missionary families in New England and undertake their American education.

The first Chinese student to matriculate from MIT was Mon Cham Cheong in 1877, just ahead of the young men from CEM. Cheong’s father was a progressive-minded, wealthy merchant who sent him to the US under the guardianship of a similarly wealthy merchant in Boston. Thus, Cheong was also the first self-funded student from China.



In all, the stories of 38 individuals are profiled in the exhibit, including the biography of the first Chinese woman to enter the institution. Her name was Li Fu Lee; she married Kuan Tung (MIT '27) and followed him to MIT. She entered as a junior and received an electrical engineering degree in 1929. There were only 25 women in her class and she was made chairman of the social committee of the MIT Chinese Students’ Club.

But it is the story of Wong Tsoo that is my personal favorite. Also known as Wong Tsu, he was among the first batch of students to graduate from the newly formed department of Aeronautical Engineering in 1916. On recommendations of academics at MIT, William Boeing hired him sight unseen to be his first chief engineer.

In less than a year, Wong had designed a seaplane of which Boeing sold 50 models to the US Navy, giving the company its start as an airplane manufacturing enterprise. (Maybe this is why, as an MIT undergraduate, I could always get a summer job at Boeing when I went home for the summers.)

Wong did not stay in Seattle long, but went back to China in the latter half of 1917. For services rendered, Boeing gave him a check for US\$50.77 as payment in full. The MIT exhibit picked up the rest of his story.

On his return to China, Wong began to design and build more planes. His factory was forced to move several times to the interior of the country to keep out of the grasp of invading Japanese troops. Because of the shortage of strategic materials during wartime, he even designed and built gliders out of bamboo for use as troop carriers.



Wong had a MIT classmate who shared his passion for aviation and was his partner in operating the first airplane factory in China. However, Japanese spies assassinated him and Wong took over managing the plant and adopted his friend's son.

He shared his enthusiasm for aeronautics by teaching in Tsinghua's engineering college where he actively encouraged promising aeronautical engineers to pursue additional training at MIT. One of his students was Qian Xuesen, who would later become the father of Chinese rocket science.

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The exhibit – curated by Professor Emma Teng, MIT's head of Global Studies and Languages – isn't just about individual stories. It also explores China's fascination with practical education available in the west at the turn of the 20th century. After a century of humiliation at the hands of the western powers in the 19th century, every aspiring student in China dreamed of additional training in the west so they could acquire the skills needed to modernize China and catch up with the rest of the world.

As pointed out in the exhibit, “by 1914, engineering had become the favorite field for government students [i.e., funded by the Chinese government.] In the eyes of many, engineering was not simply a practical skill, but a means of serving the nation.”

In 1914, MIT had 33 students from China, more than any other school in the US. This tradition continues today. With a total enrolment of nearly 13,000 undergrad and graduate students, 30% are international students from more than 140 countries. Nearly one out of every four comes from China; at a total of 888, China has more than twice the number of second place India.

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